Emergency Food Assistance Fund Report

SEPTEMBER 2021

Utahns Against Hunger

Introduction

This last year brought a lot of unexpected challenges for food pantries and food banks. The chaos of pandemic lockdowns, volunteer shortages, and general anxiety about COVID-19 required agencies to adapt services delivery models. Despite these challenges pantries adapted and continued to deliver essential services to their clients.

As a community and state, we learned how to adapt to an ever-changing environment and learned valuable lessons as a result. The following report details information gathered by Utahns Against Hunger in a survey sent to agencies funding through the Emergency Food Assistance fund and nine stakeholder meetings held in each Community Services Block Grant region.

What is food insecurity?

Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.[1] Food insecurity is generally a symptom of broader financial insecurity. Food is often one of the only variable expenses for households on a tight budget (as opposed to car payments, rent, etc.), which means it is frequently the first expense to be cut.

How is food insecurity measured?

The U.S. Census Bureau conducts the U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module through the Current Population Survey on an annual basis. The Economic Research Institute analyses the data and reports it in the fall through the "Household Food Security in the United States."[2] The survey instrument consists of a series of 10 to 18 questions depending on whether or not the household has children between the ages of 0 and 17.

Survey results are based on a three-year average and measure:
- Food security
- Food insecurity
- Very low food security (labeled "food insecurity with hunger" prior to 2006)

Food Security in Utah

According to the recently released annual report Household Food Security in the United States in 2020[3], food security rates across the country remained largely unchanged compared to last year's data. Utah's food insecurity rate was 10 percent compared to the national average of 10.7 percent.

One in 10 Utah households experience food insecurity, more than 102,000 Utah families do not have the resources to buy enough food.

Food insecurity disproportionately impacts children, female single parent households, seniors, people with disabilities, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities (BIPOC). In the 2020 report, food insecurity in the following groups was noted as being significantly higher than the national

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[1] Definitions are from the Life Sciences Research Office, S.A. Andersen, ed., "Core Indicators of Nutritional State for Difficult to Sample Populations," The Journal of Nutrition 120:1557S-1600S, 1990.

[2] *Household Food Security in the United States:* www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/measurement/

[3] *Household Food Security in the United States in 2020:* www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/102076/err-298.pdf?v=4522.9

average:[4]

- All households with children (14.8 percent)
- Households with children under age six (15.3 percent)
- Households with children headed by a single woman (27.7 percent) or a single man (16.3 percent)
- Households with Black, non-Hispanic (21.7 percent) and Hispanic (17.2 percent)
- Households with incomes below 185 percent of the poverty threshold (28.6 percent)

The information above was also provided in the recently published report to the Utah State Legislature Food Policy Task Force.[5]

Pantry Survey Results:

The Emergency Food Assistance (EFA) Fund survey asked 8 questions, the purpose of which were to learn:

- If agencies have the capacity to meet the needs of the community they serve;
- What changes were implemented to continue to serve the community;
- What agencies learned from these changes;
- Which changes they will continue using;
- The differences in number of individuals served in the year before the pandemic, and the first year of the pandemic; and
- The survey also requested that agencies report how much EFA funding was requested and how much was awarded. These questions were intended to identify the gap in funding that agencies experienced through the grant making process. In a follow-up question agencies were asked, *"How will receiving less funding than requested impact your capacity to meet the needs in the community?"*

Capacity:

Most agencies reported that that they have the capacity to serve their community's current needs, but in nearly all cases the agencies also reported that any increase in demand would result in the need to adjust their current level of service. Two agencies reported that Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES Act funding have allowed them to continue to provide their current level of services, but that their agencies will struggle financially once that funding expires. Agencies also reported greater support from the Utah Food Bank and community donors. Three pantries reported that they are not able to meet the needs of the community, citing specifically that they need additional funding for storage space, administration, capital equipment, and staffing to keep up with demand and to expand services in the region they serve

Service Delivery Changes:

What did your organization do during the pandemic to change services?

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[4] *Household Food Security in the United States in 2020* www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/102076/err-298.pdf?v=4522.9

[5] Report to the Utah State Legislature: Food Security Task Force

All but one food pantry changed their service delivery model during the pandemic, and most are keeping those changes in place through at least the end of 2021. Twenty-four of the twenty-six EFA grantees moved to either a drive-through or contactless food box delivery service. The Utah Food Bank increased and relied on mobile pantries to fill gaps in neighborhoods with increased demand for food.

Pantries also reported increased sanitation efforts, required staff, volunteers and clients to wear masks and implemented social distancing practices.

Other innovative practices were also utilized, including:

- Implementation of an appointment system
- Implementation of an online application
- Using volunteers to call and check on elderly and vulnerable clients to address their ongoing needs

What did your organization learn from these changes?

Most pantries and food banks intend on reverting back to their pre-pandemic service model once the major threat of COVID-19 declines. At least two pantries will keep or merge a hybrid model of food box pick-up. However, pantries also reported some valuable lessons learned, which included:

- The ability and necessity to adapt and adapt quickly to a chaotic environment, and the need to have emergency protocols in place to have a quick and efficient response to emergencies;
- People prefer to select their own food, as opposed to a pre-selected box of food;
- Streamlined processes, i.e. documentation collection, in-take interviews made pantries more efficient and reduced wait times for clients;
- The need to collaborate with other community partners to assist clients with all their needs;
- A greater sense of the important role they play in the community as an access point for food;
- The need for more paid staff, and the vulnerability of many volunteers;
- The importance of staying true to their principles in serving the community;
- The need to change their reliance on donated food as a sole source of food; and
- The importance of the support received from the community and just how generous people are in times of crisis.
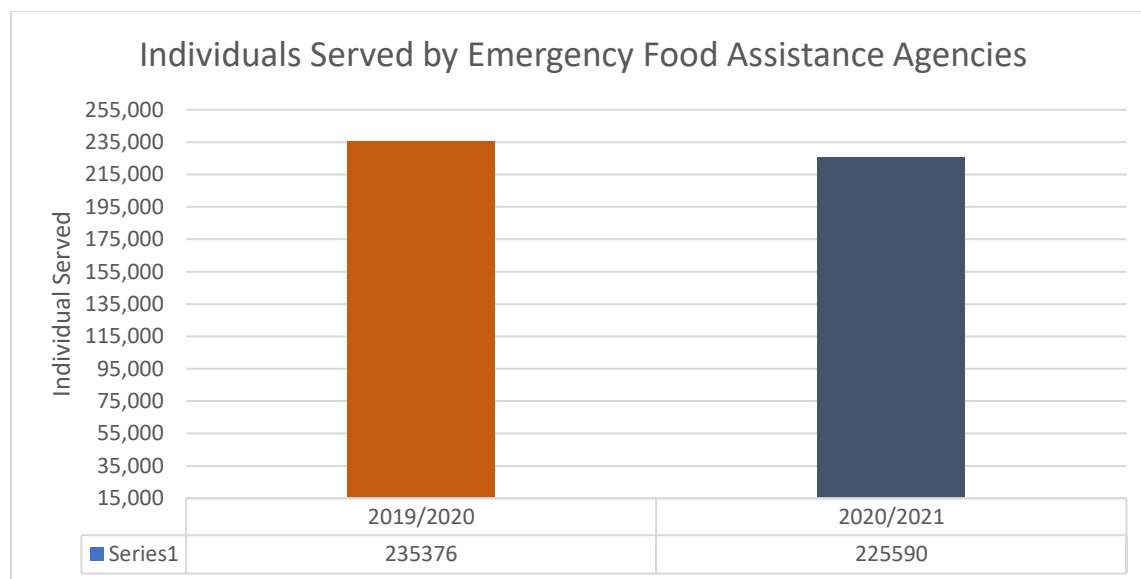
Which new practices will your organization continue to implement?

Agencies reported that some changes made during the pandemic will remain in place, or that they are currently working on implementing additional program changes. All pantries and food banks reported they will revert to in person services as soon as it is safe to do so, though some have already ended curb-side services and allow clients to choose the food they want. Most pantries indicated that they will continue to practice heightened health and safety measures moving forward, including more frequent cleaning of high traffic areas, and agencies will keep and make available personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff and volunteers. Some agencies found that streamlining the intake process saved them time and weren't as difficult to implement as they initially anticipated, and they will carry these forward and improve upon these practices, which include; curb-side service (as requested), implemented an online client choice system, and requiring an appointment for pantry pick-up which will increase case management staff's availability.

In general, the changes which were made that will be retained are those that improve services, reduce risk and increase access to services.

Individuals Served:

Access to food pantries and food banks throughout the pandemic has been difficult for many individuals and families. The need to socially distance, quarantine because of COVID-19 exposure and a lack of reliable transportation were barriers faced by those relying on community food resources. Overall, there were fewer individuals served by EFA funded agencies in 2020-2021 than the preceding year.

Individuals Served by Emergency Food Assistance Agencies

	2019/2020	2020/2021
■ Series1	235376	225590

From March 2019 to February 2020 EFA funded agencies served 235,376 individuals and from March 2020 to February 2021 EFA funded agencies served 225,590 individuals. A decrease of 4.16%. However, this isn't an indication of reduced need. Despite the challenges faced by Utahns in accessing food there were also more ad hoc resources that were available in some communities, for example the Utah Food Bank added two additional mobile food pantry sites that were targeted to specific neighborhoods, school districts foundations distributed food to families on a regular basis and the Utah Farm Bureau launched Farmers Feeding Utah, in partnership with Utah State University's Hunger Solutions Institute, Cogburn Wire Company, and the Utah Department of Agriculture & Food.

Additionally, stimulus payments, enhanced Unemployment Benefits, increased Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Benefits (SNAP, also known as Food Stamps) and Pandemic-EBT (benefits that were available to families with school age children who lost access to school meals) likely kept some families from needing additional food assistance.

Funding:

Background:

EFA funding is the combined funding stream from Emergency Food Network (EFN) funding and the Qualified Emergency Food Assistance Fund (QEFAF) fund, together there is $1,126,900 available for funding. However, funding has been eroded over time. As reported by the Utah State Legislative Fiscal Analyst in the Compendium of Budget Information (COBI) report, QEFAF funding has been fallen from

$1,490,600 in FY2018 to $915,000 in FY 2022, a reduction of $575,600. [6] EFN has also had reduced funding, falling from $283,500 in FY 2018 to $279,000 in FY 2019 (the most recent data found in COBI).[7]

The EFA fund currently funds 26 food pantries and food banks statewide. There are funded agencies in each of the nine CSBG regions. Twenty-five of these agencies operate or support 46 pantries. The Utah Food Bank has 216 partner agencies and operates 38 mobile food pantries sites in under-served communities across the state. A list of those funded agencies is noted below.

Funding Challenges:

Funding has and continues to a be challenge for some food pantries across the state. Most pantries report having enough funding to meet the current demand, but many would like to increase their service area, expand hours, hire additional staff, replace aging equipment or find larger space to improve services but lack of funding prevents them from building out their capacity.

In the FY 2022 funding cycle agencies submitted $1,640,949 in requests for funding, $514,049 short of funding available. The impact of these funding shortages has already been felt: agencies reported that receiving less funding in FY 2022 has led to:

- A reduction in staff
- Delaying capital improvements
- Delaying plans to expand services

Other agencies reported that they will simply have to fundraise the difference, it should be noted that some smaller pantries need fundraising support either because of lack of capacity, or lack of experience in grant writing. Raising additional money can be especially challenging in rural communities because there are not the same opportunities to recruit support from businesses, civic organizations and the community.

Stakeholder meetings
UAH held nine community stakeholder meeting throughout the state, based on the nine Community Action Agencies (CAAS), funded in part by the Community Services Block Grant. The purpose of these meetings was to gather stakeholders across the region to provide an overview of poverty, participation in federal nutrition program and other economic measures. Following the presentation UAH facilitated a conversation with attendees to identify barrier to food access and opportunities to increase food access.

UAH identified anchor agencies in each region to help coordinate logistics and coordinate invitations. The meetings were hosted by the following organizations:

- Cache Refugee and Immigrant Connection (CRIC)
- Ogden Weber Community Action Partnership (OWCAP)
- Open Doors
- Utah Community Action (UCA)
- Christian Center of Park City (CCPC)
- Sanpete Pantry
- Iron County Care & Share (ICCS)

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[6] https://cobi.utah.gov/2021/507/financials
[7] https://cobi.utah.gov/2021/1473/financials

- Uintah Basin Association of Local Governments (UBAOG)
- Southeastern Association of Local Governments (SEUALG)

These organizations helped UAH identify people and other agencies that should be invited to the meeting. We had a wide range of representation at the meetings, including staff from:

- W.I.C.
- child nutrition staff (at school and district levels)
- farmers markets
- county health departments
- county commissioners
- state legislators, city mayors
- city and county departments
- Community Health Centers
- higher education
- managers from the Utah Navajo Trust Fund
- the San Juan Foundation
- agencies who provide direct services to food insecure Utahns

In general, the meetings were well attended, and in every case people were engaged and interested in the data we presented and participated in the discussion. There were themes that emerged in every stakeholder meeting, and except for the Southeastern Utah Association of Local Governments region access to enough food wasn't a central concern. Rather, the systemic issues that prevent Utahns from having access to enough food, whether that is through local pantries or grocery stores.

The barriers that were most often cited, in rank order:

- Transportation, including; lack of public transportation, lack of reliable transportation, cost of fuel.
- Access to technology and lack of internet service
- Language barriers
- Cost of housing
- Stigma of asking for assistance, either through a pantry or public assistance programs

Other notable barriers include a lack of trust among immigrant communities because of the fear of how accessing programs will impact their immigration status and the lack of traditional and culturally relevant food for Indigenous, refugee and immigrant communities. Hours of operation of both state agencies and community resources make it difficult for those working traditional hours to access services. The lack of services and access for seniors was mentioned in several conversations.

The opportunities to improve access to food were wide-ranging and fell into three categories:

- Improve access to federal nutrition programs:
  - Increase outreach and education about nutrition programs
  - Increase language access for non-English speakers
  - Increase income thresholds and asset tests
  - Implement Universal Free Meals at schools
  - Increase office hours at DWS
  - Increase outreach and education for BIPOC communities

- Community food resources:
  - Increase funding for food pantries and food banks
  - Examine ID requirements
  - Utilize food rescue more and from more diverse sources
  - Develop and fund food delivery services for homebound seniors and other vulnerable populations
  - Increase mobile pantries
  - Expand the hours of when services are available
  - Connect with locally grown food producers

Other opportunities:
- Increase the minimum wage
- Increase the availability of affordable housing state-wide
- Improve coordination between community partners
- Increase opportunities for people to grow their own food, and provide the resources for people to learn this skill
- Increase relationships with local leaders who are influencers in their community
- Leverage relationships with Community Health Workers and support their networks across the state. CHWs play a vital role in reaching at-risk populations and are trusted community members.
- Increase funding for gas assistance
- Develop more transportation programs for people to get to appointments and service access points
- Start a healthy corner store initiative
- Increase the use of SNAP at farmers markets

These stakeholder meetings were so valuable. They were fun, interesting, and participants expressed appreciation that UAH came to their communities. Some of the most valuable outcomes of the meetings were the conversations and connections that were made while people were mingling after the meeting. Providing a forum for community organizations to be in the same room led to potential new projects, outreach efforts, and mutual support for the work they are doing.

Conclusion:

Food pantries and food banks across the state are doing extraordinary work, often with few resources. These agencies leverage relationships and resources in their communities to meet the needs of the clients they serve.

However, these agencies need more financial support moving forward and the opportunity to learn from each other. Stakeholder meetings proved to be a valuable and insightful forum for service providers to connect with each other and other community leaders. Building on and continuing to hold these meetings will strengthen the networks within regions.

Developing a plan to do more advocacy and education of local, state, and federal elected officials would strengthen the case for creating more resources and infrastructure for agencies providing food assistance.

EFA Funded agencies by Community Services Block Grant Region

Bear River Association of Governments

- Cache Community Food Pantry
- Tremonton Food Pantry
- Box Elder Food Pantry

Ogden Weber Community Action

- Catholic Community Services of Utah
- Lantern House
- Youth Futures

Davis County

- Bountiful Community Pantry
- Open Doors

Utah Community Action

- Crossroads Urban Center
- Jewish Family Services
- MOSAIC Inter-Faith Ministries
- Tooele Community Resource Center
- Utah Community Action

Community Action Services and Food Bank

- Christian Center of Park City
- Friends of the Coalition
- Tabitha's Way Food Pantry
- Community Action Services and Food Bank

Uintah Basin Association of Government

- Uintah Basin Association of Government

Six County Association of Government

- Central Utah Food Sharing
- Sanpete Pantry

Southeastern Association of Local Government

- PACT of Green River
- Southeastern Utah Association of Local Government

Five County Association of Government

- Switchpoint
- Five County AOG
- Iron County Care & Share

Utah Food Bank